

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 17, 2003

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States of America
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to seek clarity about the following line of your January 28, 2003, State of the Union address: "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." We do so in the hopes of providing you with the opportunity to put this matter to rest, so that we can all work together to address the pressing needs of the American people.

This statement was the most high profile of several by your Administration in making the case that war with Iraq was necessary to prevent Saddam's regime from reconstituting its nuclear program. Your words, along with those of the Vice President and other top Administration officials, played a key role in convincing many Americans – including Members of Congress – to support the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

However, it has been widely reported that evidence to back these claims was fragmentary at best and fraudulent at worst. At the same time, it appears that information contradicting this allegation – particularly the findings of former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, who investigated the allegations of attempted uranium purchases at the Vice President's request, or the objections of the State Department's intelligence bureau in a footnote in the National Intelligence Estimate – did not receive the same consideration.

Last week the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, said, "These 16 words should never have been included in the text written for the president" and "this did not rise to the level of certainty which should be required for Presidential speeches." Nevertheless, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld subsequently said that while "it didn't rise to the standard of a presidential speech... people think that it was technically accurate." On a separate program, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said, "the statement that he made was indeed accurate. The British government did say that."

While Director Tenet said about the line that the "CIA should have ensured that it was removed" – and we note that the CIA was successful in deleting a similar allegation from address you gave in October – the CIA has not traditionally written presidential speeches, or even communicated directly with White House speechwriters. Thus while Director Tenet took responsibility for this language's inclusion, it appears doubtful that it was the CIA that actually put this line in your speech in the first place. Rather, such language, as Dr. Rice herself noted, appears through guidance from the National Security Council. We also note that there have been claims by intelligence professionals that they received pressure from the White House to tailor their reporting to fit Administration policies.

We find this entire matter to be extremely troubling. First, whether or not your State of the Union statement was technically precise, the continuing controversy over the accuracy of Administration claims about Iraq threatens the credibility of the US government. This could seriously undermine future US-led efforts to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Second, the fact that the CIA is being blamed for the inclusion of this language in the speech can only further disrupt an already demoralized organization – possibly causing even more problems in obtaining reliable, actionable intelligence. Finally, and most significantly, we find it extremely disturbing that such a questionable allegation was included in a State of the Union address. This is one of the most important speeches that a President can give – and the only one you are constitutionally required to make. More than any other time, this is the occasion where the President must be fully straightforward with the American people.

We believe that it is critically important for the good of the Nation that the many questions surrounding this matter be answered clearly and concisely, so that the various rumors can be put to rest and the country can move on. Therefore, we would sincerely appreciate your responses to the following questions:

1. In retrospect, do you agree that there was enough doubt about this statement that it should not have been included in your State of the Union address?
2. Who actually wrote that portion of the speech?
3. Who pushed for this line to be included?
4. What information was this allegation based on?
5. Was there information contradicting this allegation? If there was, was it considered, and if so, why was it not deemed substantial enough to keep this line from being included?
6. Were you aware of the report of Ambassador Wilson, or of the State Department concerns expressed in the National Intelligence Estimate? If you were, what was the rationale behind including the line regardless of these findings? If you were not, why were such critical pieces of information withheld from you, and what steps are being taken to ensure that such omissions do not happen again?
7. What steps are being taken in the speechwriting process to ensure that future statements from you or other members of your Administration are not only technically accurate, but backed by substantial, credible evidence?

We appreciate your consideration of our request, and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Neil Abercrombie



Rahm Emanuel



William D. Delahunt



Joseph M. Hoefel